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ABSTRACT

Just as strong limbs do not ensure self-defense in an age of modern warfare, so strong persuasive appeals do not ensure self-defense in an age of highly technologized communication systems. The fragmentation of the audience, the inherent loss of credibility associated with the decreased status of rhetoric, and the competition among messages all have contributed to the contemporary difficulties encountered by the speaker as defender and persuader. But even as the value of public speaking diminishes, the values of understanding public speaking methods and the whole rhetorical process remain quite important. An audience-centered rhetoric deflects attention from the effectiveness and activities of the speaker to the reasoning activities of the audience. More persuaders are not socially or politically desirable, because more rhetorical stimuli may be harmful as well as ineffective. An audience knowledgeable about rhetoric and active in rhetorical processes holds the power to change attitudes and take actions. As the power of speech diminishes as a tool for self-defense, the power of reason increases in its attraction. And in reasoned silence the audience holds the balance of power in the rhetorical situation. (RL)

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PRACTICING RHETORIC WITHOUT SPEAKING

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2500 years ago, Aristotle asserted: "It is absurd to hold that a man ought to be ashamed of being unable to defend himself with his limbs but not of being unable to defend himself with speech and reason . . ."¹ Aristotle's example of a man speaking in his own defense served as an adequate illustration of the scope of rhetorical self-defense 2500 years ago, when a small homogeneous group of wealthy males dominated education and the access to public communication; when rhetoric was a respected art; when voiced arguments were few and formal.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that just as strong limbs do not ensure self-defense in an age of modern warfare, strong persuasive appeals do not ensure self-defense in an age of highly technologized communication systems. The ability to give a persuasive public speech may not be as effective for an individual's self-defense as it was in classical times. No matter how well-trained and articulate, today's public speaker is inadequately prepared to confront the vast dimensions of our contemporary world. While the future may be even more bleak for the speaker and those who attempt to produce persuasive appeals, by shifting the focus of traditional definitions, the future of rhetoric can offer promise and utility. In order to make rhetoric function as a viable, valuable tool of

self-defense, this paper suggests a major emphasis shift in the traditional rhetorical paradigm.

"Attempting to persuade," and "practicing rhetoric" have historically been used to mean the same thing. W.K.C. Guthrie summarizes the art of rhetoric from its invention by Corax and Tisius through its practice by the Sophists and observes: "its goal is persuasion."² Rhetorical history records many images of the persuasive self-defender. The Golden Age of Greece cherished the tales of heroes like Achilles. Heroes who, in the face of enemies, were equally adept at physical or verbal defense.³ In its Classic form, the image is the Greek or Roman defending his position in the senate, pleading for his life or property in the court, or defending his ideas on the side of a sunny mountain in southern Europe. Modern images include the preacher defending his faith, the poet defending his right of expression, and the political activist defending his ideology. In our Contemporary Age of electronic and technologically assisted rhetors, the images have expanded to include presidential candidates defending their position to a national television audience, a woman defending her right to have an abortion, and Smokey the Bear defending his right to a fire-free forest. Consistently, rhetorical self-defenders of any Age have been viewed as individuals (or even groups) speaking in their own defense.

The traditional rhetorical model, with few exceptions,

focuses upon the symbolic actions of the speaker. Among the clearest explanations of the model is Gerald R. Miller's:

(The rhetorical) paradigm takes the following form: an active speaker strives to do something to a relatively passive audience - - to change its attitudes or alter its behavior by skillful use of linguistic and paralinguistic codes. Central to this view of the rhetorical paradigm are the terms active speaker and relatively passive audience; for even as one pays the customary, contemporary homage to the importance of audience feedback there still remains no doubt about the major locus of activity, involvement, and energy. It is, of course, by design rather than by accident that the only kind of question not requiring an overt answer is a rhetorical question. Nor is it a coincidence that one often hears references to dynamic speakers, but seldom to dynamic audiences. In the traditional rhetorical paradigm, the persuader acts, while the "persuadee" is acted upon.⁴

While many scholars argue that the rhetorical process has not changed, it cannot be denied that the rhetorical scene has changed. The world has developed in ways that dramatically reduce the power of speech for defending one's self, ideas, and position on an issue. Because of the increased diversity of the audience and heterogeneity of experience, adequate proof is unavailable; because of the disparagement of rhetoric, the speaker faces an inherent loss of credibility; because of the amount of rhetorical stimuli, the likelihood of attention by an audience is reduced.

Contemporary practitioners of rhetoric are confronted with a situation analogous to the Tower of Babel episode.

They are capable of signaling their messages in loud clear voices, but the transmission is garbled because the audience speaks many different tongues. Rhetoric lacks the ability to be an effective force because society is increasingly fragmented into groups, with each group encumbered by its own language (formal or informal), culture, subcultures, experiences, and values.

Lewis H. Lapham, editor of Harper's magazine, laments this fragmentation into small groups with each group isolating itself into its own customs, ideology, and language. He observes:

If the social critics have told us anything in the past twenty years, they have told us that the nucleus of American culture, of a society held in common, has dissolved into fragments. There no longer exists a theatre of ideas in which artists and philosophers can perform the acts of the intellectual or moral imagination. In nineteenth-century England, Charles Darwin could expect On the Origin of the Species to be read by Charles Dickens as well as by Disraeli and the vicar in the shires who collected flies and water beetles. Dickens and Disraeli and the vicar could assume that Mr. Darwin might chance to read their own observations. But in the United States in 1979 what novelist can expect his work to read by a biochemist, a Presidential candidate, or a director of corporations; what physicist can expect his work to be noticed, much less understood, in the New York literary salons?⁵

This fragmentation has grave implications for producers of persuasive appeals. If a society were divided into broad classes (eg. the elite and the masses), an effective persuader could develop an understanding of the composition of the classes, search for the appropriate means of persua-

sion for particular audiences, and supply proof that would be adequate for the audience. In contemporary society, the divisions among individuals are not as readily perceivable as the distinctions among broad rigid classes. Even if the speaker could visually survey the audience for blue collars and white collars, for example, it cannot be assumed that clothing would be an indication of deeper personal commitments. The divisions are subtle and diverse. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. observes:

. . . the lines of division in our politics have fundamentally altered. The issues are no longer social or economic so much as they are cultural and moral. It is no longer the common man against the boss as much as it is the rational against the indignant, the planner against the spoiler, the humanist against the uneducated, the young against the old.⁶

Even the skillful speaker's appeals are no defense where his/her effectiveness is strongly diminished by personal, linguistic, cultural, and experiential separations with no mechanism for reaching identification.

Another reason rhetoric as speaking and persuading has diminished utility for self-defense is that its methods are suspected by the audience. No longer is rhetoric associated with a well-reasoned clash of ideas, but with tricks, techniques, or ulterior motives. Rhetoric is viewed as a stalling technique, a distortion, a lie, or a cover-up. As Wayne C. Booth sees the state of rhetoric:

Arguments for our beliefs or actions have become "mere rhetoric" or propaganda or

rationalization. Passionate commitment has lost its connection with the provision of good reasons. And reason has been reduced to logical calculation and proof about whatever does not matter enough to engage commitment.⁷

Contemporary audiences are likely to respond that they want "action instead of talk" or "reality not rhetoric."

Walter J. Ong suggests that the skilled practitioner of rhetoric, who could function well enough in the world a few centuries ago, now has difficulty because the rhetorical world of the past has given way to a world of technology and romance. The technologists are moved to action or attitude change by facts, hard data, and solid evidence, while the romanticists are moved by feelings and sensations. The skilled speaker is rendered somewhat less effective because the technologists suspect rhetoric for not being hard and factual enough, while the romanticists are suspicious of rhetoric as a cold, calculating, and manipulative art.⁸ This loss of credibility of rhetoric leads to a preconceived loss of credibility for the speaker/self-defender.

The speaker is prodded toward impotence by lacking any sort of transcending credibility, by the low esteem of rhetoric itself, and, finally, by competition for someone to listen. The volume of competitive voices severely diminishes the potential of speakers to defend themselves and their ideas by producing rhetorical appeals. Persuasive appeals saturate the potential audience. In 1977,

over 60% of American homes had at least one television set in operation on any given night; 26% of the homes had television on during the day.⁹ The major communication industries all showed substantial revenue increase in 1977 over 1976. Billboards, signs, bulletins, newsletters, formal meetings, informal conversation, direct mail, matchbook covers, and ball point pens all contain persuasive appeals. As Lewis Lapham observes:

The trade and university presses produce more than 40,000 titles a year. . . . So many volumes on so many subjects, so many theories, reflections, reports, judgements, asides, maps, metaphors, commentaries, parodies, fine phrases and narrative transitions, so much expense and imagination. But to what end?¹⁰

Even scholars are not immune. A report in The Chronicle of Higher Education describes the increase in the number of scholarly journals as "explosive growth" and recommends "further growth in the number of scholarly journals should be discouraged."¹¹

Even though several indications suggest that we may be approaching the painful point of saturation by communication stimuli,¹² plans are being processed to find new ways to persuade. Commercial persuaders are testing three minutes of advertising at movie theaters,¹³ miniature billboards on shopping carts in super markets,¹⁴ and contests which quiz the readers and viewers on the contents of particular advertisements.¹⁵

There seems to be no evidence that the amount of total

rhetorical stimuli for each individual will abate in the near future. New causes and problems will cry for attention, entrepreneurs will herald their new products and services, a new generation of politicians and political ideas will find ways to work their appeals into the major vehicles of communication. How to reach an audience and be persuasive with that particular audience will still be an important practical problem. With communication stimuli increasing to a point where each added stimulus may have diminishing returns, the rhetorical paradigm of speaker-speech-audience may be a myopic and anachronistic view. Bright, articulate students of communication studies may have many opportunities for producing conventional and innovative messages, but may face increasing possibilities that few will listen.

The fragmentation of the audience, the inherent loss of credibility associated with the decreased status of rhetoric, and the competition among appeals all contribute to difficulty for the speaker as defender.

Defense against other groups and individuals in contemporary society can be more effectively accomplished by collective action or by securing paid experts than by raising the solitary voice of the speaker/self-defender. On a practical level, legislatures suffer from a scope so broad that defending a political position may depend more upon scheduling the issue with a favorably disposed commit-

tee leader than looking for possibilities to argue the point before the full body; successful defense before the judiciary may have little to do with the presentation of compelling arguments to the jury; there is little evidence that any single ceremonial or popular speech may contribute to any lasting change in values or beliefs. Any single voice flounders in the multitude of voices making appeals and crying for their cause.

Yet good reason exists to continue rhetorical investigation and training. In spite of diminished odds against making significant public impact as a producer of persuasion, rhetorical training provides value in interpersonal relations, in group settings, and within professions and disciplines. But, more importantly, understanding the rhetorical process is valuable. As the value of speaking as a self-defense diminishes, the value of understanding remains.

Perhaps the biggest area where self-defense is necessary is the defense against persuasive appeals. Those who use persuasive appeals do not necessarily have any great commitment to the rhetorical process, rather, their primary commitment lies in securing a favorable decision, making a sale, or obtaining a vote. Yet their persuasive appeals aim at every facet of our lives; social, political, spiritual, educational, and certainly commercial.

As long as scholars search within the traditional rhetorical paradigm, the questions will focus upon the speaker:

"How effective was the speaker?" "What accounts for the speaker's effectiveness (or lack of effectiveness)?" Even though Aristotle, and certainly Cicero, concentrated their efforts and rhetorical theories upon the assumption of an active speaker and relatively passive audience, within their traditional definitions of rhetoric possibilities lie for active audiences.

Neither Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as, "The faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion,"¹⁶ nor Cicero's definition of rhetoric as, "The art of discourse,"¹⁷ precludes an actively involved audience. If the audience wants to protect its interests, and choose wisely among rhetorical stimuli, it should be actively involved in the rhetorical process. It should in every case, decide what are the available and appropriate means of persuasion; even without speaking, the audience, for its own protection, should be strongly participating in "the art of discourse."

An audience-centered rhetoric de-emphasizes the effectiveness and activity of the speaker, focusing rather upon the reasoning activity of the audience within the rhetorical situation. Such an emphasis would imply that the audience decides whether a particular piece of rhetoric is persuasive or not, an active decision based upon an understanding of the rhetorical process and a personal choice about the particular arguments. Lifestyles, vocational

choices, educational opportunities, political and religious options, and consumer choices exist by virtue of voices presenting arguments for these concerns.

More persuaders are not socially or politically desirable, and adding more rhetorical stimuli may even be harmful as well as ineffective. A more pressing social and political need is for active audiences making demands for reasonable arguments, rendering the rhetoric of tricks, gimmicks, and saturation less effective.

An audience knowledgeable about rhetoric, and active in the process, holds the power to change its attitude or not to change, take an action or refrain. As the power of speech diminishes as a tool for self-defense, the power of reason is an attractive possibility for an alternative. Even in reasoned silence, the audience holds the balance of power in the rhetorical situation.

NOTES

¹Aristotle, Rhetoric, 1355^b, ed. and trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: The Modern Library, 1954), p. 23.

²W.K.C. Guthrie, The Sophists, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 179.

³Homer, Illiad, trans. William Benjamin Smith and Walter Miller (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1944), p. 195.

⁴Gerald R. Miller, "Toward A Rhetoric of Counter-attitudinal Rhetoric," Rhetoric: A Tradition In Transition, ed. Walter R. Fisher (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1974), p. 280.

⁵Lewis H. Lapham, "The Easy Chair," Harper's, June, 1979. p. 12.

⁶Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The New Liberal Coalition," Progressive, April, 1967, p. 16.

⁷Wayne C. Booth, Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. xi.

⁸Walter J. Ong, Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 8.

⁹"A Drop In TV Viewing, But Not In Ad Pricing," Business Week, January 16, 1978, p. 34.

¹⁰Lapham, "The Easy Chair," Harper's, p. 12.

¹¹Malcolm G. Scully, "The Conditions of Scholarly Communication: Serious But Not Fatal, National Study Finds," The Chronicle of Higher Education, May 7, 1979. p. 1.

¹²Even though revenues in the communication industries are increasing, audiences are decreasing in television, See: "A Drop In TV Viewing, But Not In Ad Pricing," Business Week, January 16, 1978, p. 34; Audiences are not growing as rapidly as revenue in magazines, See: "Why Black Ink Is Spurting At Magazines," Business Week, December 12,

1977, p. 142; Audiences are not responding to direct mail at the level of a decade ago, i.e. Responses have dropped from 3% to 6% in the mid-1960's to less than 1% in 1978, See: Survival In Direct Marketing, Business Week, October 23, 1978, p. 148. Singer and Singer reported the effects of television saturation on the audience concluding: "American TV may actually be impeding our capacity for sustained attention, deliberate thought, and private imagery," See: Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L. Singer, "Is Human Imagination Going Down the Tube?," The Chronicle of Higher Education, April 23, 1979. p. 56.

¹³"Tonight At The Movies: The Latest National Ads," Business Week, October 24, 1977, p. 39.

¹⁴"Reinforcing the Impact of T. V. Commercials," Business Week, July 18, 1977, p.40.

¹⁵"Reinforcing the Impact of T. V. Commercials," p. 41.

¹⁶Aristotle, 1355b, p. 24.

¹⁷Cicero, De Oratore, III, xiv, 54-56, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942), p. 43-45.